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THE RUSSIAN FLEET AND THE CIVIL WAR

THE coming of the Russian fleet to our shores in 1863 has been a topic of discussion for many years. A great deal of importance has been attached to this event both in the United States and in Russia. Curiously enough, in neither of the two countries is it generally recognized that this official visit was of any consequence to the other. In Russia it is regarded from the point of view of European politics, while in America many people associate it with the Civil War. Through the kindness of the Russian Minister of the Marine in permitting the writer to examine the official documents, and through timely articles on the subject in the *Morskoï Sbornik*, it is now possible to learn the real motives of the expedition.

It will be remembered that during the period of our Civil War Russia was having difficulties in Poland. The Poles were restless under the political conditions imposed upon them by Nicholas I. From Alexander II. they expected a change for the better, but when one year after another passed without any very marked improvement their discontent began to manifest itself in active opposition to the government. It first showed itself openly on February 25, 1861; and during the following two years it assumed such a formidable character that it became a matter of deep concern to the whole of Europe. Thinking that by seizing the most active participants in the insurrection the trouble could be made to die out, the Russian police, on the night of January 15, 1863, entered many homes in Warsaw and arrested the men with a view to putting them into the army. This act stirred the European powers and made the year 1863 an exceedingly critical one; for a time it looked as if it would lead to a general European war.

Prussia desired the friendship of Russia and the collapse of the uprising and therefore concluded, in February, 1863, a military convention binding the two nations to aid one another in putting down the revolt. France, England, Austria, and the other powers stood out against Russia and her treatment of the Poles. On April 17 the representatives of these governments addressed a note of remonstrance to Prince Gortchakov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs. This not having the desired effect they followed up the first note by a second in June and a third in August. This is not the place to enter into the diplomatic discussions that took place.

The point at issue, to put it briefly, was this. France, England, Austria, and the other powers argued that the Polish question was an international one, having been made such by the Congress of Vienna, and therefore that all those who signed the treaty of 1815 should have a voice in its settlement. Russia, on the other hand, insisted that the question was a purely domestic one and that no intervention would be acceptable. She would yield so far as to agree to consult the powers directly concerned, Austria and Prussia; but since Prussia was already on her side this concession was equivalent to a refusal. The point in dispute was clear and sharp and it could be decided in one of two ways: either by one or the other of the two contending parties backing out or by all fighting.

Russia expected to be called on to defend her cause by arms, at least she thought it was wise to prepare for whatever might come. On January 22, 1862,¹ the Grand Duke Constantine, general-admiral of the navy, instructed Popov, who was about to set out for Asia to take command of the Pacific squadron, that in case of war between Russia and a power stronger than Russia the weaker of his ships should be ordered to a safe harbor and that with those remaining he should destroy the enemy's commerce.² In June, 1863, war seemed inevitable, and General-Adjutant Krabbe, who directed the navy while the grand duke was at Warsaw, began to work on a plan of campaign. The fleet was very weak, even weaker than it appeared on paper. It was made up of a small squadron in the Pacific, seven war vessels of various descriptions at Cronstadt, and a frigate in the Mediterranean. They were all, or nearly all, of wood, and, although they had engines, the principal means of motion was still the sail, the orders being that steam should be resorted to only in case of urgent necessity. With these facts in mind, Krabbe submitted a report to the emperor on July 5, on the part which the navy might be made to play in the coming conflict. He pointed out that the history of naval warfare in general and the present American conflict in particular taught that a few war-ships, properly handled, could do a great deal of harm to the enemy. England, he said, avoided war with the United States because she knew how much her merchant marine would suffer from American cruisers. Russia's fleet was too weak to make an effective fight against the combined naval strength of England and France, but it was strong enough to prey upon their commerce. He went on to suggest that as soon as England realized what Russia had in mind

¹ Dates are according to new style.

² A.M.M., D.K.M.M. (Arkhiv Morskogo Ministerstva, Dielo Kantseliarii Morskogo Ministerstva), no. 91, pt. I.

her attitude on the Polish question would change. If the fleet remained at home it would probably be blocked in; it was therefore necessary that it should be sent away to some place more conveniently situated for the purpose in mind. But this was a delicate operation. In order not to arouse England's suspicion the ships ought to leave singly, their apparent destination to be the Pacific or the Mediterranean. Even the officers should be kept in the dark as to the real motives until the very last minute. He concluded by saying that everything was to be gained from such a move and nothing to be lost. Supposing that the fleet failed in its purpose and in addition was destroyed, Russia's cause would not suffer, because, tied up at Cronstadt, it was both worthless and a care. If, however, the plan succeeded, much good would result.³

These arguments appealed to the emperor and he accepted Krabbe's propositions on July 7. Orders were at once given to put the ships in condition for foreign service and to provide them with money for two years. Rear-Admiral Unkovskii, a man of much naval experience, was offered the command of the Atlantic fleet, but, on his declining, the position was tendered to Captain Lisovskii, who was promoted to the rank of rear-admiral.

On July 26 Krabbe gave Lisovskii his instructions, which had received the approval of the emperor three days earlier. They were divided into fifteen points and were in substance as follows: "Your fleet is to consist of three frigates, three clippers, and two corvettes. In case of war destroy the enemy's commerce and attack his weakly defended possessions. Although you are primarily expected to operate in the Atlantic, yet you are at liberty to shift your activities to another part of the globe and divide your forces as you think best. After leaving the Gulf of Finland proceed directly to New York. It would be preferable to keep all the ships in that port, but if such an arrangement is inconvenient for the American government you may, with the advice of our representative in Washington, dispose of the vessels among the various Atlantic ports of the United States. When you learn that war has been declared it is left to you how to proceed, where to rendezvous, etc. Our minister will help you in the matter of supplies; he will have on hand a specially chartered boat to keep you informed of what is going on. Should you find out on the way that war has broken out begin operations at once. If soon after reaching New York you deem it wise to go to sea try to keep your fleet together until war is actually declared, but avoid the enemy, even commercial ships, so as

³ *Ibid.*, no. 109, pt. I.

to cover your tracks. If through our minister or some other reliable source you are told of the opening of hostilities, dispose of your ships and plan your campaign as may seem best. Captain Kroun is preceding you to America to prepare for your coming. Study the Treaty of Paris so as to be well informed on matters of neutrality. Should you meet with Rear-Admiral Popov consult with him as to the course to be pursued. Communicate in cipher. Hand in person your secret instructions to the officers. Whether there is war or not make a study of the commercial routes, of the strength and weakness of the European colonies, of desirable coaling stations for our fleet, and of the economic and military importance of our own possessions. These instructions are made purposely general in order to give you a free hand to act according to your judgment and discretion."⁴

Towards the end of January, 1862, Popov left Europe for Hong Kong, arriving there in April. During that summer he sent his ships to different places in the Far East to observe the strength and weakness of the European colonies and also to give his men the necessary training. He himself sailed from Kamchatka on August 26, to visit Sitka, Esquimalt, and San Francisco, anchoring in the last-named place on September 28. On the return voyage he called at Honolulu and from there steered for Nagasaki, where his fleet was to rendezvous in November. During the winter other cruises were made, and with the experience and knowledge thus acquired he was in a position to know how to act when called upon.

He had not very long to wait.⁵ On April 24 Krabbe wrote him of the critical situation in Europe and warned him to be ready at any moment to attack the enemy. Gregg, one of the officers of the admiralty, notified him on June 3 that the news of the declaration of war would be telegraphed to him to Omsk (end of the line), whence a courier would take it to Tientsin by way of Kiakhta and Peking. A boat should be ready at the mouth of the Pei-ho River to meet the courier. Seventeen days later Krabbe sent a despatch similar to the above, adding that he could not promise that the news would reach Popov before it reached the English admiral. On July 31 there followed a telegram, to the effect that affairs had reached a most acute stage and that he must keep in close touch with the Russian minister in Peking and not be far from Hong Kong or Shanghai where European news was to be had. Popov had, how-

⁴ A. M. M., D. K. M. M., no. 109, pt. I.

⁵ An interesting account of Popov is found in the *Morskoi Sbornik* of August and October, 1914. Popov was a very able officer and his reports, found in the archives, throw much light on conditions in the North Pacific.

ever, made up his mind how to act. The letter sent by Krabbe on April 24 had come to his hand on July 20. On the following day he replied that he was going to San Francisco, and ordered a collier to Kodiak Island, Alaska, which place he intended for one of his bases.⁶

About the middle of July orders were also telegraphed to the commander of the frigate *Oslabia*, at that time in Greek waters, to sail for America. On the way he was to stop in Portugal in order to learn of the state of affairs, to give out the destination as Siberia, to keep on the trade route between Liverpool and the West Indies; and he was told where to join the main body of the fleet, and how to proceed in case of war. About the same time Kroun departed for New York to explain the plan of campaign to M. Stoeckl, Russian minister in Washington, and to make ready for the coming of Lisovskii.

Since the cruise has nothing whatever to do with American affairs it is interesting to know why United States ports were selected for a base of operations. Aside from the friendly relations that had always existed between the two nations there were special reasons why they should draw close to each other at this critical period. Alexander had freed the serfs; Lincoln was emancipating the slaves. The United States had been invited by France to join the powers in dictating to Russia upon the Polish problem and had declined; Russia had been asked by France to intervene in the Civil War and had refused. Russia was fighting against insurrection; the United States to put down rebellion. The two governments had similar problems and the same European enemies and that was reason enough why they should feel kindly towards each other.

There were, however, other reasons why the fleet should come to America. In order to carry out Krabbe's plan the ships could not remain in Russia, and there was no other place in Europe where they would be received in friendliness. On the other hand, if anchored in one of the Atlantic ports of the United States, it would be possible to dash out quickly and in a short time be on the trade routes. This condition held true in the Pacific as well as in the Atlantic. Popov, who was not altogether bound as to his movements, decided to go to San Francisco for the following reasons. He had been there in 1859 and 1862 and had made many friends. If he should come again he was sure of a friendly reception. Every other available harbor in the Pacific, including those of Spanish America, was in the hands of the English, Dutch, Spaniards, Portuguese, or French, or under their influence. If he should enter a

⁶ *Morskoi Sbornik*, October, 1914, pp. 35-40.

Chinese or Japanese port he would incur the danger of being blocked in by a superior force, for the enemy was certain to hear of the declaration of war two or three weeks before he did, because it had postal and telegraphic connections as far as Calcutta and fast boats from there to Shanghai. Of course he might wait in one of the Russian stations in the North Pacific, but these had neither postal nor telegraphic facilities, nor means for provisioning or repairing his ships, so that when he finally went to sea he would be greatly handicapped, and in place of seeking the enemy he would be looking for something to eat. Taking all these points into consideration, San Francisco seemed the most desirable port. The English and French, though numerous, were just then unpopular; the American population felt kindly towards the Russians, and their cruisers would be permitted to go and come as they pleased.⁷

When Lisovskii had received his orders he wrote to Captain Kroun to expect him in New York by September 1. Before entering the harbor he would send in one of his corvettes to learn of the state of affairs. If hostilities had not yet begun he would come in with all his force; if however the conflict was on, provisions should be sent to him to the island of Santa Catharina, Brazil, so as to reach there between November 1 and November 20. Supply ships should also be on hand by March 15, 1864, in Lobito Bay, Benguela, Western Africa, and by July 15 in San Matias Bay, Port San Antonio, Argentina.

Just before sailing Lisovskii called his officers together to acquaint them with the task before them. He decided that the first rendezvous should be in the Little Belt, and from there they would sail together, passing to the north of Great Britain, and try to reach New York before the war. If, however, after leaving the Belt a superior English and French force appeared and insisted on following, this would mean that it intended to attack as soon as war was announced. In that case Lisovskii was to signal, "separate on the first favorable occasion", and each ship was to take advantage of the fog or darkness to slip away and sail for New York. Should the opposing fleet act in an unfriendly manner, as by ordering the Russians back or in some such way, the admiral was to give the signal to attack. If in crossing the Atlantic it was learned that a state of war existed the plan of campaign was to be as follows. The *Alexander Nevskii* would operate on the route between Liverpool and South America, the *Peresviet* on the course taken by ships in going from England to the East Indies, the *Variag* was to look for commercial ships south of the equator, the *Vitiaz* between Cape

⁷ A.M.M., D.K.M.M., no. 91, pt. II., p. 410.

Hope and St. Helena Island, and the *Almaz* to capture every vessel of the enemy sailing between the equator and five degrees to the north. If war was declared by October 15 the rendezvous would be Santa Catharina Island.⁸

It was the original intention to put in commission seven war-ships, but on examination two were discovered to be unseaworthy and were left behind. Before going very far Lisovskii must have concluded that the remaining five were far from being in condition for hard service. The sails did not fit, the sea poured in through the port-holes, the food was poor, the sailors were inexperienced, never having undertaken such a long and hard voyage: all of which caused hardships, and scurvy broke out.⁹ Finally on September 24 the flagship *Alexander Nevskii* and the *Peresviet* sailed into New York, followed in the course of the next two days by the *Variag* and the *Vitiaz*, and fifteen days later by the *Almaz*. The *Oslibia*, coming from the Mediterranean, had made this port about the middle of the same month.

The arrival of the fleet at New York came as a shock and surprise to London. Brunow, the Russian ambassador, who it seems was not advised of this piece of political strategy, became quite worried and convinced that this event would surely lead to war. He imparted his fears to Gortchakov, who began to question the wisdom of the whole thing and felt inclined to blame Krabbe. The latter stood his ground, and argued that England would not fight if her commerce would be endangered by so doing, and that a few Russian guns in the ocean would have more influence on England than a much larger number in Sevastopol.¹⁰ Brunow and others were instructed to say, when questioned as to the purpose of the expedition, that the fleet was on its regular cruise to relieve other ships, and that until the European political situation was settled the ships would probably remain in the waters of the United States. It was for the European powers, particularly England, to draw whatever conclusions they pleased.

In their expectation to find a warm welcome in America the Russians were not disappointed. When Gideon Welles was officially notified of their coming he wrote to Stoeckl on September 23, expressing his pleasure at the news and placing at the service of the Russian admiral the Brooklyn Navy Yard and the other resources of the Navy Department. During the stay of the fleet in American waters deputations from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania,

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 109, pt. I., p. 87.

⁹ *Morskoi Sbornik*, August, 1913, p. 43.

¹⁰ A.M.M., D.K.M.M., no. 109, pt. II., p. 64.

Rhode Island, and other states came to pay their respects. Balls and banquets were given in honor of the officers, and the name of the emperor was cheered as the emancipator of the serfs and the friend of America. In their turn the Russians toasted the President and dwelt, as they were requested to do, on the historic friendship which bound Russia and America. All references to the European situation were purposely avoided. This was good diplomacy, for on the one hand it concealed the real purpose of the visit and on the other it strengthened the Americans in their belief that the fleet came especially for their benefit. The fact that this idea still has such a strong hold on our country shows how skillfully the game was played. It is only fair to say that this idea was not brought over on the fleet but was born on American soil. In their relations with the officers of England and France the Russians bore themselves in a friendly and correct manner. When the English and French ministers visited New York Lisovskii called on them, but only Lord Lyons returned the call."¹¹

The festivities were not allowed to interfere with the main purpose of the visit. Stoeckl watched the political horizon and kept himself well informed of what was going on in Europe. About the middle of November it seemed as if a crisis had been reached and that war would surely follow. Lisovskii telegraphed for permission to go to the West Indies and there divide his forces for action. Krabbe replied, in December, advising him to remain where he was, and telling him that there was no danger of his being blocked in, because Stoeckl would warn him in plenty of time to make his escape.

Rear-Admiral Popov, with his squadron, consisting of the corvettes *Bogatir*, *Kalevala*, *Rinda*, and *Novik*, the clippers *Abrek* and *Gaidamak*, anchored in San Francisco harbor on October 12, and immediately put himself in touch with the legation in Washington. The officers and men were as warmly and as enthusiastically received on the Pacific as on the Atlantic. These courtesies and the hospitality were deeply appreciated by Popov and his men, and not in words only, for they expressed their gratitude in deeds. About three weeks after their arrival a big fire broke out in the city and the Russian officers and sailors rendered much valuable assistance in putting it out. For this service the city council passed resolutions of thanks which they framed and gave to Popov.¹² But the Russians were willing to do much more, not merely to help San Francisco but also to fight the battles of the nation, and if the proper

¹¹ A.M.M., D.K.M.M., no. 109, pt. II., pp. 72, 73, Stoeckl to Krabbe.

¹² *Ibid.*, no. 91, pt. III., p. 34.

opportunity had come they would have done so. During the winter of 1863-1864 San Francisco was without the protection of a man-of-war. It was reported that the Confederate cruisers *Sumter* and *Alabama* were planning to attack the city. In view of this possibility Popov took measures to prevent it. He gave orders to his officers that should such a corsair come into port, the ranking officer of the fleet should at once give the signal "to put on steam and clear for action". At the same time an officer should be despatched to the cruiser to hand to its commander the following note:

According to instructions received from His Excellency Rear-Admiral Popov, commander in chief of His Imperial Russian Majesty's Pacific Squadron, the undersigned is directed to inform all whom it may concern, that the ships of the above mentioned squadron are bound to assist the authorities of every place where friendship is offered them, in all measures which may be deemed necessary by the local authorities, to repel any attempt against the security of the place.

If no attention were paid to this warning and the cruiser should open fire it should be ordered to leave the harbor, and in case of refusal it should be attacked.¹³ Russia came very near becoming our active ally.

Copies of these orders were sent to Stoeckl and Krabbe, who forwarded them to Gortchakov. The replies and comments of these men bring out in the clearest possible light Russia's attitude towards the Civil War. In his letter of March 13 to Popov, Stoeckl expressed himself in this manner. As he understood St. Petersburg diplomacy, so far as Russia is concerned there is neither North nor South but a United States, and therefore Russia has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of another nation and consequently Popov should keep out of the conflict.

From all the information to be obtained here [he goes on to say] it would seem that the Confederate cruisers aim to operate only in the open sea and it is not expected that cities will be attacked and San Francisco is in no danger. What the corsairs do in the open sea does not concern us; even if they fire on the forts, it is your duty to be strictly neutral. But in case the corsair passes the forts and threatens the city, you have then the right, in the name of humanity, and not for political reasons, to prevent this misfortune. It is to be hoped that the naval strength at your command will bring about the desired result and that you will not be obliged to use force and involve our government in a situation which it is trying to keep out of.¹⁴

Gortchakov thoroughly disapproved of Popov's plans and urged on him the strictest neutrality. He had foreseen the possibility of

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 103.

¹⁴ *Morskoi Sbornik*, October, 1914, p. 45.

such a situation. In a letter of January 27, 1862, addressed to Krabbe, he had pointed out that although Russia had not declared her neutrality in the war between the states, yet her status was exactly the same as if she had done so. Russia did not intend to support the North against the South and the naval officers should be warned on that point.¹⁵ There was nothing secret or deceitful in this attitude. He had made his position clear to the American government more than once. In a conversation with Bayard Taylor, our chargé d'affaires, on September 27, 1862, he had said, "We desire above all things the maintenance of the American Union. We can not take any part more than we have done. We have no hostility to the southern people."¹⁶ The American public can without difficulty appreciate his stand, especially in view of our own attitude towards the European struggle now going on.¹⁷

During the winter months the European war clouds passed away. Russia held firm and won. England was willing to call names but not to fight, and France was helpless without England. Gradually the insurrection was put down and the excitement subsided. Officers of the Russian navy assert that the coming of the fleet to America was, if not altogether, at least in a very great measure, responsible for England's change of front and consequently for the prevention of the war.¹⁸ Before this conclusion can be accepted evidence from English sources will have to be produced. The claim may have more substance than appears on the surface; the diplomatic aspect of the question as well as the strategic importance of such an expedition needs more investigation. It is true that the Russian papers and many of the statesmen of that time attached a great deal of value to the visit. When the fleet returned to Cronstadt the emperor reviewed it, thanked the officers for their service, and promoted nearly all of them. One writer states that Alexander II. looked on this cruise as one of the greatest practical

¹⁵ A.M.M., D.K.M.M., no. 91, pt. I.

¹⁶ *Exec. Docs.*, 38 Cong., 1 sess., II. 840 (1863-1864).

¹⁷ In 1864 or 1865 (the exact date is difficult to determine from the document) while the Russian clipper *Izumrud* was anchored at Brest there was a report that the *Shenandoah* planned to attack a merchantman of one of the northern states. In view of this the commander of the clipper asked for instructions from the Russian minister at Paris as to what to do under the circumstances. In reply he was advised to avoid trouble with the *Shenandoah*, but "if in the presence of our ship the *Shenandoah* attacks any vessel of the North American States the commander of the *Izumrud* should render the latter every assistance [obiazuetisia okazat posliednomu vsiakoe sodieistvie] and make a report of the affair to our representative at Washington." See A.M.M., D.K.M.M., no. 106, p. 218.

¹⁸ See article on this subject in *Voennaia Entsiklopediia*, vol. II. Also the writers in the *Morskoï Sbornik*, noted above, and the quotations which they give.

achievements in the history of the Russian navy and one of the noteworthy pages in the history of his reign.¹⁹

No one can question for a moment that this visit gave much moral support to the cause of the Union. At a time when European powers were plotting against us, when conditions at home were most discouraging, we felt that we had a friend in Russia. It put life and strength into the people of the North. Every one took the visit as a special mark of friendship and it was highly appreciated. Writing to Bayard Taylor on December 23, 1863, Seward says: "In regard to Russia, the case is a plain one. She has our friendship, in every case, in preference to any other European power, simply because she always wishes us well, and leaves us to conduct our affairs as we think best."²⁰ Its general effect on the whole nation is excellently stated by Rhodes:²¹

The friendly welcome of a Russian fleet of war vessels, which arrived in New York City in September; the enthusiastic reception by the people of the admiral and officers when offered the hospitalities of the city; the banquet given at the Astor House by the merchants and business men in their honor; the marked attention shown them by the Secretary of State on their visit to Washington "to reflect the cordiality and friendship which the nation cherishes towards Russia": all these manifestations of gratitude to the one great power of Europe which had openly and persistently been our friend, added another element to the cheerfulness which prevailed in the closing months of 1863.

On April 26, 1864, Gortchakov told Krabbe that the emperor said there was no longer any need for the fleet to remain in America. Lisovskii was notified the next day to get ready to return home. Somewhat similar orders were despatched to San Francisco.

In the course of their stay in American waters the officers visited many cities and were everywhere entertained with pleasure. Before departing from our shores the Russians gave a reception at Washington to which were invited members of the Cabinet, Congress, and many other leading men of the country. It was a brilliant affair and one of the social events of the season. This brought to an end a unique and interesting episode in Russo-American diplomatic relations.

It is, of course, true that the fleet was not ordered to America for our benefit, but this should not blind us to the fact that we did profit by the event as if this had been the case. If, as the Russians maintain, the presence of their ships in our waters saved them from

¹⁹ *Voennaia Entsiklopediia*, vol. II.

²⁰ *Exec. Docs.*, 38 Cong., 1 sess., II. 851 (1863-1864).

²¹ Rhodes, *History of the United States*, IV. 418.

a struggle in which they were not in a position to engage, we should be very proud that it was in our power to do so. It was a most extraordinary situation: Russia had not in mind to help us but did render us distinct service; the United States was not conscious that it was contributing in any way to Russia's welfare and yet seems to have saved her from humiliation and perhaps war. There is probably nothing to compare with it in diplomatic history.

F. A. GOLDER.